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ABSTRACT

A critique predicated primarily on aesthetic considerations can show the potential a speech has to move an audience, but gauging a speech's actual effects on the audience is more difficult. A case in point is the United States Congressional investigation of the Iran-Contra scandal. Government officials and businessmen sold arms to Iran in exchange for the release of U.S. hostages held in Lebanon and then used the sale proceeds to illegally finance rebel resistance in Nicaragua. Marine Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North, a central figure in the affair, was able to shift the focus away from the issues of the case through skillful manipulation of television, through his speech and his appearance. Senator George Mitchell of Maine, North's key Senate interrogator, reacted to North's media manipulation with his own televised statement. He sought to return public attention to the issues of the case by highlighting inconsistencies in North's position without directly attacking him. Mitchell underscored the oddity of promoting Nicaraguan democracy through undemocratic means. The senator was then able to refocus attention on basic U.S. values through personal anecdotes. Mitchell reported that the reaction to his statement was immediate, overwhelming, and mostly favorable. In the end, North was exonerated and no national debate on the morality of the Iran-Contra affair ensued. Both men gained notoriety as a result: North became a popular conservative speaker, and Mitchell became Senate majority leader. (SG)

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Enhancing Ethos: The Role of Epideictic at the Iran-Contra Hearings

Presentation at the Conference on College Composition and Communication
March 19, 1992

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In the summer of 1987 the Senate and House Select Committee on Secret Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition conducted hearings into what has become popularly known as the Iran-Contra Affair, the greatest scandal in American politics since Watergate. With the help of private businessmen, government officials sold arms to Iran in exchange for the release of American hostages in Lebanon and then used the proceeds of those arms sales to illegally finance the Contra resistance against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. The investigation was probably doomed from the beginning.

A number of circumstances militated against full disclosure of the truth: the death of a pivotal figure, CIA Director William Casey, the shredding of key documents, partisan political bickering, the delaying tactics of government bureaucrats in supplying documents and desputes with the Special Prosecutor's Office about granting immunity. Ironically, though, a partial picture of the Iran-Contra Affair did emerge from the Committee hearings despite these obstacles. But the proceedings did less to illuminate the facts of the case than to provide a forum for Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North to obscure and undermine the vigorous national moral debate which should have arisen from the scandal. In a brilliant dramatic performance, North shifted the focus of the investigation from the real issue of the case, i.e., the supreme importance of strict adherence to the rule of law in a democracy, to a blind and hypocritical patriotism which he seemed to equate with a slavish devotion to the

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policies of Ronald Reagan, a devotion so utterly inconsistent with American values that it could justify any means to establish a democratic government in Nicaragua.

North was aided by several factors in diverting attention from the relevant issue of the case. Undoubtedly, though, the decisive factor which allowed him to shift focus from the key issue of adherence to rule of law in a democracy was his consummate ability to manipulate the medium of television. That Oliver North was a military hero was beyond dispute. He had received the Silver Star, the Bronze Star, the "V" for valor, two Purple Hearts and various other military awards and commendations. Moreover, he had been highly respected in Vietnam as a platoon commander who would go to almost any lengths to insure the safety of his men. Under the bright lights of television before a national audience, however, he seemed to transcend human proportions. Sitting rigidly erect in his starched military uniform with a chest full of medals, he seemed the perfect embodiment of American values--duty, honor, country. In their book, Men of Zeal, Maine Senators George Mitchell and William Cohen reflect on his television magnetism:

> His telegenic face filled the entire screen. His clear gray eyes (perpetually moist) reflected sadness, anger, sympathy. His voice was alternately soft and forceful, and it cracked at just the right emotional moment. He sat ramrod stiff, Clint Eastwood, Audie Murphy, Alan Ladd, and John Wayne all buttoned up in one charismatic persona. (p. 163)

His imperfections vaporized. Few members of Congress and even fewer members of the television viewing audience seemed to care that he had lied, broken the law, and arrogated great power to himself. On the contrary, anyone who attacked him, even circumspectly, was villified by the American public.

The short-term effects of North's performance are well known. For some time, he had enjoyed Ronald Reagan's confidence. He was a

"national hero" and the President's "favorite Marine." But now the whole country seemed to embrace the gritty lieutenant colonel, who had attacked twenty-six lawyer-politicians (a seemingly even match for one Marine, quipped Cohen and Mitchell), and firmly replanted the American flag on Capitol Hill. Time magazine called the national adulation of North that ensued "Olliemania." Admirers held candlelight vigils for the Marine hero on the steps of the Utah State Capitol. Ollie North dolls, bumperstickers and buttons appeared. Donations to pay for North's legal defense poured in. North received 15,000 telegrams of encouragement, which he piled high in front of television cameras.

Maine's junior senator, George J. Mitchell, was becoming increasingly alarmed, not only because of rumblings in the weekly news magazines impugning North's mental stability and moral integrity, but also because of the overwhelmingly favorable response that the marine was receiving from the American public and the unhealthy deference that many Committee members now paid him. Moreover, he was incensed at North's intimation that those who disagreed with the President's policy toward the Contras were unpatriotic, and he was convinced that covert operations had to be conducted in a lawful manner in a democracy where public officials are accountable for their actions.

As the Democrats' chief Senate interrogator of North, Mitchell was in a strategic position to act on his misgivings. He brooded for some time about how to conduct his interrogation of North, but was convinced from the beginning that, given the lieutenant colonel's ability and propensity to circumvent issues, simply questioning the witness was not going to suffice. He concluded that he must make a statement of his own, but was unsure how to approach it until he consulted both fellow Maine Senator Bill Cohen and political advisor and former law partner Hal Pachios on a trip back home the weekend before the televised hearings ended. Cohen advised him to take North on on the issues but not to attack him personally and Pachios counseled him not to attack North's credibility, but rather "to

pick an issue and stick with it." The following morning Mitchell sat down at his desk and wrote the statement that Cohen called "the first real break in North's virtuoso performance" (p. 175).

Senator Mitchell's task was not to effect an ideological conversion of his audience. On the contrary, he could assume an ideological consensus on the idealized societal values of freedom, justice, equality and rule of law which North had obscured by his appeal to blind patriotism. Mitchell's task was to refocus attention on those values, and to increase public adherence to them so that Americans would ultimately reject North. The difficulty, however, was to redirect that attention without appearing to personally attack North, who by now was enjoying unprecedented popularity. If Mitchell were to regain the moral high ground and reverse the emotional tenor of the moment, he had to discredit North, to reduce the Marine hero to human proportions, without engaging in a direct confrontation. The emotional tension of the moment and the complexity of the mass television audience precluded an elaborate logical refutation. Instead, Mitchell refocused his audience by using innuendo to subtly imply inconsistencies and contradictions in North's position in order to demonstrate the lieutenant colonel's deviance from cultural values. Once Mitchell had exposed North, he drew upon a personal anecdote to project himself as a reification of the American Dream in order to reinforce the public's adherence to the idealized cultural values of freedom, justice, equality and rule of law and to move his audience to reject North.

On the surface at least, Mitchell seems to have nothing but praise for North. The lieutenant colonel, for example, talks "often and eloquently" about the need for a democratic outcome in Nicaragua; his background is "really very compelling" and "one of the reasons the American people are so attracted to you;" one of his most compelling qualities is his "obvious devotion to our country." At no time during the statement does Mitchell accuse North of being the agent of any wrongdoing. Even when the Senator draws conclusions

about the facts of the case, he uses passive voice to eliminate agents altogether rather than implicate North.

He implies culpability, however, by subtly identifying contradictions and inconsistencies in North's position which conflict with democratic values. At the beginning of his statement, for example, Mitchell notes that any disagreements that Americans have in establishing democracy in Nicaragua are with means not ends:

> Colonel North, you talked here often and eloquently about the need for a democratic outcome in Nicaragua. There is no disagreement on that. There is disagreement over how best to achieve that objective.
>
> Many Americans agree with the President's policy. Many do not.
>
> Many patriotic Americans, strongly anti-Communist, believe there's a better way to contain the Sandinistas, to bring about a democratic outcome in Nicaragua, and to bring peace to Central America.

Mitchell brings this introduction to a climax, however, by intimating to his audience North's first major inconsistency:

> And many patriotic Americans are concerned that in the pursuit of democracy abroad, we not compromise it in any way here at home.

The supreme irony of the Iran-Contra Affair, though, is that zealous American operatives like North have used undemocratic means, i.e., unauthorized covert operations, to attempt to establish a democratic government in Nicaragua. Mitchell avoids a direct attack on North by using the inclusive "we," which, of course, refers to the entire American citizenry. Clearly, though, "we" refers here to Americans as guardians of responsibility for American policy at an abstract level. The American public can not supervise the day-to-day operations of authorized covert programs. That onus falls on those

operatives like Oliver North who have been duly appointed to carry out these programs in compliance with the law.

Another damning inconsistency lies in the basic premise of North argument. Mitchell lays out his own basic premise about a third of the way through his speech:

> We must never allow the end to justify the means where the law is concerned. However important and noble an objective--and surely democracy abroad is important and noble--it cannot be achieved at the expense of the rule of law in our country.

This premise contrasts starkly with North's position which, though not explicitly stated, can be inferred from his actions, already verified in earlier testimony. He believes that **under certain circumstances** the end does justify the means **even where the law is concerned.** Otherwise, he would not have illegally sold arms to enemies of America. Clearly, this proposition is inconsistent with democratic values and untenable in a democratic society where members enter into an implied contract to abide by the rule of law. If the law can be broken with impunity in one circumstance, it can be broken with impunity in all circumstances because there is no longer an ultimate authority to sanction the actions of citizens. The law degenerates into the idiosyncratic interpretations of individuals. North's position releases national security operatives from the responsibility of notifying oversight commitees of their covert actions and implicitly sanctions secret programs which have never been approved by any publicly accountable agency. It is, in essence, Ollie North's warrant to conduct his own foreign policy.

Once Mitchell has exposed North, he refocuses attention on basic American values through the emotional appeal of a personal anecdote, a poignant story about his rise from humble beginnings to the powerful positions of federal judge and United States Senator because of the American commitment to equality of opportunity and equal justice under the law. He found his career as a judge particularly gratifying because he had one especially great power,

the power to make immigrants American citizens. It was, he revealed, the most exciting thing he ever did in his life. After naturalization ceremonies, he would always ask new citizens why they would risk their lives, families and fortunes to come to this country. Universally, they said that it was because they had equality of opportunity and the freedom to criticize the government.

The anecdote passionately and eloquently counterbalanced North's stories of selfless devotion to his president and his country. If Oliver North reified patriotism, George Mitchell reified the American dream. Because the Senator lived in a country which valued freedom, justice and equality, the poor son of an immigrant mother and a first generation American father was able to attain two of the most powerful and revered positions in American society. While Mitchell portrays America as an object of virtue where possibilities seem almost limitless, however, he reminds his audience that one of the values that warrants appreciation of America is the fundamental right to disagree with the policies of the government. Indeed, millions of oppressed people have risked everything to come to America to secure that right, and their opinions are just as valid as those of Oliver North or Ronald Reagan.

This critique has been predicated primarily on aesthetic considerations, i.e., on the potential the speech has to move an audience. As any competent rhetorical critic knows, gauging the actual effects of a speech on an audience is a difficult task since there is seldom sufficient tangible and reliable evidence to render a judgment. A well-constructed, aesthetically pleasing speech, like the statement of Senator Mitchell, is no guarantee of producing the desired effect on an audience. In Men of Zeal Mitchell describes the immediate response of auditors to his statement:

> The response was immediate and overwhelming. Before I finished speaking, every line in every one of my offices was busy. By the thousands they came in, first the telephone calls, then the telegrams, then the letters. Most were favorable. The

unfavorable, although few in number, were intense in their hostility. (p. 172)

Still, the effects of the speech in educating and moving the public to action remain dubious. No national debate ensued on the morality of the Iran-Contra Affair, and legislation introduced by Mitchell and Cohen to correct its abuses never became law. Further, Colonel North was eventually exonerated of all counts on which he was indicted.

Perhaps Senator Mitchell can content himself with the indirect results of the Iran-Contra Affair. According to Current Biography, his performance at the hearings catapulted him into the position of Senate Majority Leader in a "meteoric rise...unequaled in the history of the upper chamber in this century, except for the career of Lyndon B. Johnson" (p. 409). North, on the other hand, after fulfilling Andy Warhol's maxim of having his fifteen minutes of fame in July of 1987, was forced to resign his Marine Corps commission and leave government service. While lasting fame has eluded him, however, fortune has not. He currently travels the chicken and pea circuit, commanding hefty fees, if no longer an army of his own, speaking at fundraisers for ultraconservative candidates. Yet, chicken and peas aside, it must leave a bad taste in his mouth to be dismissed from the national limelight that once deified him.

Surely, Senator Mitchell, though not a military man, can also take some consolation in having fought the good fight in attempting to repel a Marine assault on fundamental American values, in having stood in the way of the juggernaut of blind patriotism, and in having exposed those who, in the words of Committee Vice Chairman Senator Warren Rudman (R-New Hampshire), "wrap themselves in the flag and go around spitting on the Constitution" (Cohen and Mitchell, p. 76.)